



Deast Durham: A neighborhood in transition Folks take a chance 'to get the ball rolling'

Originally published in: The Herald-Sun

Monday, May 04, 2009

Edition:

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This is the second of a three-part series examining the past, present and future of the East Durham neighborhood.

DURHAM -- About 2,000 cars pass through the intersection of Angier Avenue and Driver Streets every day, a small commercial district in the blighted East Durham neighborhood, and there's not much encouraging them to stop.

Beyond the cracked sidewalks are mostly shuttered doors, but inside three of the storefronts signs of life are emerging -- and they are signs, too, that the neighborhood is changing.

A tall, brawny man directs activities as work proceeds to refit these spaces into three new businesses, a sandwich shop, an Internet cafe and a small grocery store.

The imposing figure belongs to Joseph Bushfan, a private security contractor who has worked with music stars including Alicia Keys and Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston. He bought the properties last year and with help from a city grant, plans to open his new businesses -- and provide a spark for development in the rest of the neighborhood -- this summer.

Little signs of hope like this bloom all over the neighborhood known for problems with crime and gangs. Next to run-down and boarded-up houses sit beautifully renovated and well-tended bungalows, and preservationists and residents hope these are signs of a turnaround that will make East Durham a sought-after location for home buyers in 10-15 years.

As for Bushfan, who grew up in the notorious Roxbury area of Boston and has lived in the much-maligned Compton, Calif., East Durham's reputation for crime and gang activity is overblown.

"I think it's a false image," Bushfan said. "I think they need to get rid of the taboo."

Bushfan's career took him all over the world, but it also kept him away from home for up to 10 months out of the year, and he decided he wanted something more stable. Also, Bushfan, who is the husband of Chief District Judge Elaine Bushfan, wanted to be known as more than the husband of a judge.

When he started a hot dog stand that he operates around town, one of his spots was at the corner of Angier and Driver, and he noticed how many cars were passing through the neglected intersection. He bought the three storefront properties and a parking lot for \$138,000 with help from some partners.

"You're centrally located. You're right by 70 North and South, 55, 147, Miami Boulevard," he said, running down the

major traffic arteries that pass near East Durham. "But nobody's stopping, and you've got tremendous potential."

The neighborhood's convenience, both for driving and walking, is a point that boosters mention regularly.

Kimberly Sage said that when she was looking for a house 20 years ago when she moved to Durham from St. Louis, she wanted an affordable, older house in a diverse neighborhood that offered a convenient commute to her job at Duke Hospital. She found all that on Driver Street, up a few blocks from Bushfan's corner.

"It's just a great location," Sage said.

She even finds it convenient to Chapel Hill, where she takes her daughter to dance lessons, about a 20-minute drive.

Aidill Collins, who has lived on Vale Street for about six years, had similar criteria when she went house hunting six years ago. Originally from the racial melting pot of Queens, N.Y., she had leased an apartment in the Southpoint area for a year and wanted something different.

When she found the house on Vale Street, she made several trips to the block at night before committing to the purchase, and she was hooked when she heard how quiet it was, the sound of children playing the only sound she heard.

Collins was a recent UNC graduate, working for a nonprofit organization and not making a large salary, but she didn't want to spend any more on a lease. She found that buying in East Durham gave her more space for her money than she found in other areas.

"I like when people are relaxed and informal and comfortable having you on their porch or back yard, and I kind of missed that since moving from New York," she said.

And the neighborhood is not only convenient for her commute, but she loves walking from her house downtown, straight down Main Street. She also has occasionally made the walk to Northgate Mall, about 2 1/2 miles from her house.

Her roommate, a student at Durham Technical Community College, doesn't even own a car. She gets around by a combination of bicycling, riding the bus and carpooling.

Collins said she feels a sense of mission in living in East Durham and trying to nurse the neighborhood back to health, but she said that's not the main reason she lives here.

"As much as I give the neighborhood, it gives more back," Collins said.

There are signs that efforts to rebuild East Durham are having an effect. Arson, a problem that comes along with vacant buildings and drug trafficking is down, according to police statistics.

Collins said she sees her neighbors taking more pride in where they live, not apologizing for it.

Bushfan said he still sees the signs every day of how people in the neighborhood are hurting. Sometimes he helps by handing out a free hot dog, but he hopes his new project will do more to help for longer.

"Somebody has to take the chance to create the ball to get it rolling," Bushfan said.

A series

Sunday: A vibrant past

Today: A tentative present

Tuesday: A hopeful future

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